

IS GODLY LOVE ENOUGH? REFLECTIONS ON AN ACE MARRIAGE

Name Withheld

It is a great irony of my life that my wife identified as queer but I was the one that felt sexually trapped. We were in a mixed-orientation marriage. She is asexual, or Ace, and I am straight. To say there was a disparity in desire is something of an understatement. My needs were largely invisible, even unknowable to the person to whom I was supposed to be closest. For a time, I felt that if my family fell apart, it would be due to my fundamental identity and needs. In other words, it would be my fault.

Like many Mormons, I grew up in a sexually repressive environment. I'd wager mine was worse than most. For instance, I never got any version of *The Talk*. When couples kissed on TV, my mother, who was so kind and good in so many ways, would change the channel. I became deathly afraid of bringing up the word "girls," lest my mother find out I knew that boys and girls were different. Shame was a regular companion—as a result, pornography became one, too. That's the great irony of that parenting approach.

But I got myself reasonably well adjusted before getting married and was excited for a healthy sexual relationship. My fiancée and I bought a newlywed book and read it out loud together in preparation for the big night. We learned in detail how each other's bodies worked. I thought we were ready to start exploring.

Our wedding night came. Like many LDS couples, our night ended without the fireworks we anticipated. The attempt at sex was too

uncomfortable, too painful, and things sort of closed up for my wife as a result. But unlike most LDS couples, we didn't have intercourse until nearly a year into our marriage. It didn't stop being painful or uncomfortable for her until after the birth of our first child, several years later. When pornography entered the void of sex, I informed her—and remarkably, she wasn't angry with me at all.

But I was angry with myself. I thought it was all my fault. I hated myself for relying on porn and fought that battle with myself up and down for many years. It didn't loosen its grip on me until I stopped hating myself, stopped feeling shame, and realized how normal my sexuality actually was, and how abnormal my marriage was. Turns out, it's very normal for a straight man to want to have sex with a woman, and that's why we have marriage and push it so hard on our young adults. It's an essential part of life, even our doctrine.

As I saw and understood the sex-shaped gap in our marriage, I developed a deep testimony of sex. It is so much more than just an outlet of physical need, though that is how it manifests at its core. Whether you look at the physical sensations experienced, the emotional bond formed, or the human life created, happy sexuality is a celestial order.

And sexual attraction is about more than just intercourse. It's the force that drives a couple together when the tumult of life would tear them apart. It makes it easier to forgive and look past faults in times of conflict. Regular physical contact breeds more than just children, it breeds trust and warmth. A couple without that attraction binding them cannot easily be one flesh, one soul.

When I confessed to my wife about my pornography use, she gave me a hug but didn't really say much. I was relieved there wasn't further shame. But I learned much later that she also felt a deep sense of relief. After all, if I had porn, I had a sexual outlet that wasn't her. She would no longer feel the obligation to have sex with her husband. I didn't know anything about her orientation at the time, and she didn't know

the words for it, herself. But that's the mentality that permeated our sexual relationship.

It went on as long as it did because it seemed like we gradually found some success. From the wedding night on, I always sought her satisfaction first. Always. I could not personally be fulfilled if she wasn't. And eventually it worked. As she told it to me, an Ace can still feel sexual feelings, including orgasm. However, it is more like a bodily function than the sensual experience that tempts and teases, a pressure that, like a sneeze, can nonetheless feel pleasurable when it is released. I did everything I could to invoke this throughout our marriage. But the eroticism that gives deeper meaning to such feelings and connects two mates never materialized for her. The release alone did not add up to much, and eventually, all she felt was the pressure.

So it was no surprise to me when she finally did come out as Ace, about twelve years into our marriage. It sounded simple enough to understand at first and made sense. The encounters we did have were few and only ever initiated by me, the passion was one-sided, and my own body had never been of any interest to her—all sources of great sadness for me. I'd seen asexuality every day of my life for over a decade before it got the name.

And when I finally saw what psychological pain my attempts at a sexual relationship brought on her, including my attempts to meet her needs, I put a stop to those attempts, making a firm commitment never to hold any sexual expectations of her again. It was one of those stupid bravery moments when life grants you the opportunity to be a martyr. I don't regret volunteering to do it, but I was not prepared for everything I was about to experience—or stop experiencing. It was the end of so many things, not just sex. An entire life, a worldview, a stability I'd been building and relying on for twelve years. The marriage changed, and would not change back.

As we learned over many years of trying, our coupling was something unnatural. My own body, my sexuality, were obtrusions, always

an invasive force. It could work if it absolutely needed to; we did have two children after all. She could tolerate me and my drive to a point, but any intimate touch at all was either painful or uncomfortable in some way, and eventually I realized that my sexuality had become smothering. Facing the fact that your expression of love is actively harming its recipient was very difficult, but I decided to pull back.

Within a week of my commitment not to seek sex anymore, she expressed how much happier, more relaxed, she was, and I could see her standing up on her own two feet. In truth, I found her new independence unsettling. I felt less relied on for emotional support than I used to be, and physical contact was limited to comfort hugs, and even those tapered off. We became mere roommates. She asked that, whatever my sexual needs were, I fulfill them . . . elsewhere, however I had to. And she was happier this way.

Suffice it to say, this was not a recipe for a healthy marriage. But it was worse than just a crumbling relationship. My foundational understanding of my marriage, of marriage in general, of sealing ties, of the entire gospel was suddenly destabilized. No, it fell apart. Covenants were designed with a certain kind of relationship in mind. When that relationship fundamentally changes, shouldn't the covenants? But they didn't, and God didn't come out and deliver any replacements or answers. I wasn't told what I should do, where I should go, what He expected of me in this special situation. I was shoved up against my covenants like bars on a cage.

I realized my choices lay in three different directions. Which was the least important to me: my covenants, my children, or my sexuality? I could keep my family and have extramarital affairs but break my covenants. I could divorce my wife and remarry, breaking up my family but rediscovering my sexuality and stay within the rules. Or I could somehow just stay in this marriage and keep my family and my covenants but give up an essential part of myself and open myself up to immense temptation and loneliness throughout my life. Which

blessing was I most willing to sacrifice on the altar? Which aspect of my identity?

The problem churned endlessly in my mind. Every day felt like a unique challenge. I didn't know how I'd get to the other side of each day emotionally or spiritually intact. The feeling of powerlessness was unmatched. I could take nothing for granted and had to request new manna from heaven every morning. The daily efforts of dealing with so many unknowns left me utterly exhausted. Temptation beset me on every side; surely the rules were different for me in this bizarre situation.

But there was no plan for people in my position. There were no theological mechanisms in place to solve my problem. My situation was not to be found in scriptures, and no solution has been proclaimed from a pulpit. My friends had no answers. I skipped my bishop and went straight to my stake president. He had no solution. I even spoke with a member of the Seventy. There was no balm of Gilead that could soothe those wounds.

The fulcrums of our lives don't have to tip us forward. While trials are not optional, growth is. This martyr moment was not simply going to be an act of endurance; it was something I'd have to either endure well, or not at all: grow and develop and shed so many of my flaws and insecurities, or fail, and fall, and self-destruct spiritually. It wasn't a leap into the darkness—I was pushed.

As so often happens after falling through such darkness, God eventually visited me with some light. It came in the form of a few certain talks by Elder Neal A. Maxwell. As I listened to him speak, two things happened: first, I felt God's eye on me, His thoughts on me, His ears listening to me; second, I could see the plan of salvation stretching eternally in both directions, premortally and celestially, and I knew my place in it, and the place of my loneliness. There was a purpose to it, I absolutely knew it, and in that moment, my testimony of the gospel crystallized. I had no doubts. Like when you're in love and all the songs on the radio suddenly make sense, so did my trials make sense in

this gospel of Jesus Christ. I could even see myself more clearly in the mirror of my choices.

God never did provide a ram in the thicket. I had to make a choice, and so I did. I loved my wife, and I decided to remain at her side for the foreseeable future. I spent a year training my heart and body to love my wife without desiring her. By her request, I peeled away my physical attraction to her, though I still felt attracted to women in general. Even if it was harder to know this new person, she was the real version of the woman I thought I knew all these years, and it was better to know and love the truth. That was the choice I made.

I still haven't told many people about all this. I am afraid of explaining it imperfectly, of my journey being judged unrighteously. Asexuality is so hard to understand without getting intensely personal. There is so much room for subjectivity, it is so easy to judge or outright deny for those for whom it is not a reality.

And so, I don't judge anyone for a different decision in a similar situation. Anyone who has ever felt trapped with eternal consequences at stake has my respect for the hell they've endured no matter what they did to get out. There was a time when I seriously considered going outside my covenants. Multiple times. I don't know what God's ultimate plan is for His sons and daughters in other such situations, or what He expects of the rest of them. That's between them, not me and not you.

Frankly, I don't believe all His covenants were made for all of His children the way they're set up now. Because whatever we preach from the pulpit doesn't change the cold hard reality: there simply *are* multiple sexualities. I can't deny the forces of identity that are transforming my life, my family, my eternity. Like the many queer children of God stuck between the Church's teachings and the sexuality that defines their existence, I can't preach it away or pray it away. And I've done a lot of praying.

I have learned intimately the experience of those beautiful queer saints, and how few solutions there are to be found. Some have tried to

force heterosexuality on themselves, locking themselves into the same cage I found myself in, having created children and formed eternal bonds but still torn asunder by the forces God put inside their bodies. Some literally break themselves trying to be and do what the Church asks.

Why did He send so many of His children down to perform this impossible mission? I crave an answer to that question. I heard of a gay man who wrote in his suicide note, “I’m going to ask Heavenly Father why he made me this way.” No child of God should have to ask God that question to His face.

Sexuality is inescapable. How we deal with our sexual impulses and identity will define our entire lives. The consequences are immense. That’s why rules and lines abound, why we have instituted marriage as the defining sexual relationship of our lives and placed so much cultural and theological emphasis on sexual roles and responsibilities—father and mother, dating and marriage, chastity and covenants. So when someone is homosexual or asexual, it should also matter. It shouldn’t be something we try to ignore or sweep under the rug or ask them to keep quiet.

God instituted marriage as the proper place for the sexuality with which He gave us. But what about the other sexualities He created? What do we do with them? Where was mine supposed to go? Like the rest of the body, you can argue with your sexuality, but if you don’t learn to work with it, you will lose. We are told to bridle our passions, not destroy them. And yet some of us seem to be expected to, in fact, destroy them.

I don’t know why God made my wife Ace, or why asexuality even exists, but it is a real thing, and I had to deal with it in my real life; I could not simply play theologian in the pews. I pray for and await another grand revelation. This is the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times when nothing shall be withheld, when all that was once kept hidden should be revealed and made known. Whether there be one sexuality, or many sexualities, they are plainly being manifest.

My wife did not know about her sexuality before marriage. How could she? A sex drive can have many degrees, and most unfortunate of all, asexuality can look like righteousness in our culture. My wife told me that after Young Women's lessons on chastity as a teenager, because she wasn't tempted by sexual things at all she felt at the time she must be righteous! I would have thought the same thing in my youth (and indeed felt the exact opposite). It is deeply unfortunate that we associate sexuality so much with sin.

Maybe if we as a church are open about the complications of sexuality and stop pretending that if our young people simply keep the law of chastity everything will work out for the best, and encourage them to actually understand themselves sexually, fewer well-meaning but naive young Saints will lock themselves into eternal covenants that they can't possibly understand at the time—covenants that may not be meant for them. I don't regret the thirteen years of my marriage, but if I'd known back then about the asexuality, I probably would not have entered into it. My wife wouldn't have, either. It's not a fair situation! Not to me, and certainly not to her—an asexual person should not be compelled by ignorance to enter into the obligation of sexual engagement that the partnership of marriage entails.

So I don't blame my wife, but neither do I blame God. It would be easy to. Sometimes life feels like God has thrown us into a cage with a dozen hungry monsters, but I believe He never fails to throw a knife in with us. Looking back, it is clear God ensured I had the resources to survive my trial. My weapon was a lesson I needed to start learning immediately: godly love. The love that transcends sexual attraction. I had a friend placed very purposefully in my life who admonished me to learn to love my spouse no matter what, even if it's unreciprocated or one-sided—and how to sacrifice without building up resentment. That's what real love is. God loves us even when he receives no love in return. Christ sacrificed for us before we ever loved or worshiped him.

I learned to accept and love my wife for who and what she really was—not what I thought or wanted her to be. That lesson saved me

from the instant bitterness that many might feel—and from a quick and bitter separation. I see the way we as members of the Church have treated members of the queer community and I think we need to learn the same lessons to save our two communities from permanent separation. The queer LDS community's continued participation in the gospel shows they have learned this very love already.

Attempts at mixed-orientation marriages do not traditionally have fairytale endings. I thought mine could be different. Ours concluded in divorce. Godly love turned out not to be enough for our marriage relationship, in the end. Despite our efforts, our paths ended up diverging just too much. Marriage was simply not the right institution for our unique relationship. Yet ours was not a parting of bitterness and resentment. We continue to love each other as family, and our lives will be intertwined forever. Godly love may not be enough to sustain a marriage, but it will sustain a family, albeit not one where man and woman are defined by our sexual roles.

As I set out to remarry and rebuild, God's ultimate vision for my family eludes me. But we remain bound by sealing ties. We did build something, and we will not let that unique creation be torn asunder. Even if it may not end up exactly as we envisioned, it can still end up as God envisioned. He is the master builder, not us, and we are not finished until He says we are.

My family may yet require much sawing, cutting, and hammering to mold us into the shape we're meant to be. There will be additions, renovations. The path to celestial life may not even look like celestial living in any given moment—that's why I refuse to judge anybody else. Maybe my own choices will be challenged by someone with different values or priorities. I can't point to mine and say look at this beautiful fairytale ending, not yet. It's still one day of manna at a time. But that's its own blessing, isn't it? There's still time. Until we're out of this life, God is not done renovating. Not our souls, not our families, and not the living church itself.